

Our Church's Story – Jose Ynez Perea

Hebrews 12:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Over the past 19 years, I've shared stories about some of the people who played important roles in the beginning of our church. People like our founding pastor Rev. John Shields, Pueblo Church Mission Teacher Mary Stright, and lay pastor Paul Barry. This morning I want to tell you a story about another significant leader. His name is Rev. Jose Ynez Perea. He was the first Hispanic Presbyterian minister in New Mexico as well as the country.

Perea was born April 23, 1837 on a large sheep ranch near Bernalillo. His parents, Don Juan and Dona Josefa Chavez de Perea, were devout Roman Catholics. They were also "ricos" or wealthy individuals. His brother Francisco became a famous politician and was the postmaster of Jemez Springs from 1894 to 1905. One of his sisters became a nun.

Perea's middle name Ynez was unusual. It's a girl's name meaning chaste or pure. Jose was given it accidentally. When it was time for his christening as a baby, the family traveled to the nearest mission in Isleta Pueblo.

As they were fording the Rio Grande, the river's current almost capsized the family's wagon. Jose's godmother was terrified. When she was standing in front of the priest, she couldn't remember the child's middle name. The priest grew impatient and glanced at his calendar of saints. It was the feast day of St. Ynez, so he christened the child Jose Ynez Perea.

Jose unusual experience of faith continued during childhood. Legend has it that at age 7 he shot a toy arrow through his mother's picture of the Virgin Mary. This maybe also the reason his father sent him to school in Chihuahua, Mexico.

From there Jose was sent to a French Jesuit school in New York where he deepened his emerging Christian faith. Jose fell in with boys who were reading the Bible in secret. At the time the Roman Catholic Church forbid lay people's independent reading of the Bible in the vernacular, especially if it was a Protestant Bible.

Supposedly when Jose's family learned of his clandestine activities, they disowned him. Another story says that his still hopeful father sent him to a merchant apprenticeship in St. Louis. After that he did two years at West Point.

None of his schooling changed Jose's new found faith. To avoid a family confrontation when he came home after West Point, he went to California. He signed on with a merchant ship and began a five-year career as a seaman who visited most of the world's major ports.

When Jose returned to the States on the east coast, he went to a Protestant revival in Boston. He ran into a friend of the family who arranged a reconciliation. By the time they reunited, Jose learned that his father had discovered the Bible for himself.

Soon after his return home, Don Juan died. He named Jose and his brother Francisco executors of his estate and gave them most of his holdings. A ranch near Las Vegas, NM, was given to Jose.

Running the family mercantile and ranch was not enough for the young man. Over the next 10 years, Jose distributed Spanish language Bibles, testaments and tracts to shepherds, cowboys and neighbors.

It was lonesome work and Jose prayed for help. That's when the Rev. John Annin, an irascible Presbyterian Scot, showed up. He was sent by the national Presbyterian church to start a mission in Las Vegas. Under Annin's tutelage, Jose began to preach in plazas and homes across northern New Mexico. He even preached at the wakes of smallpox victims.

Jose soon became a licensed Presbyterian missionary, and in 1870 the first ruling elder or church officer in First Presbyterian Church, Las Vegas. He also was commissioned to attend the General Assembly, the national meeting of the Presbyterian Church in Chicago.

Without Jose, First Church Las Vegas, may not have been formed. He put up a lot of the money for its construction and he supplied beef or mutton to feed the builders. When the church building was finished, Jose gave \$400 to install a bell tower.

Perea's evangelistic heart sent him riding from sheep camp to sheep camp, plaza to plaza, preaching, distributing Bibles and helping plant missions in northern New Mexico towns like Taos, Rincones, Ocate, and El Rito. He met considerable opposition along the way. On at least one occasion, Jesuit priests held a Protestant book burning in the plaza.

In spite of all his evangelistic activities, Jose was still lonely. He married Victoria Armijo, daughter of a prominent Las Vegas physician. But sadly, Victoria died within the year.

Some would say it was providential when Rev. Dr. Taylor Ealy and Susan Gates arrived in Las Vegas. He was a medical missionary and she was a mission school teacher. They were on their way to Lincoln County when they stopped to visit Rev. Annin and were introduced to Perea.

The Lincoln County War made the area too dangerous for the missionaries to work. So, they were reassigned to Zuni Pueblo. Perea accompanied them as an interpreter and occasional preacher.

On Christmas Day 1877, Susan Gates and Jose Perea were married with Ealy officiating. They eventually had eight children and began a preaching a teaching missionary team that operated up and down the Rio Grande from Corrales to Socorro.

Perea became impatient with his work at Zuni Pueblo. It seems Ealy used him as a day laborer as much as an interpreter and preacher. The Perea's got transferred to Jemez Pueblo to work with the Rev. John Shields the founding pastor of our church.

The first time Jose is mentioned our church records is on Sunday, September 8, 1878, when the Rev. Sheldon Jackson, Rev. John Shields, and Elder Jose Perea from the Presbyterian Church in Las Vegas organized the church at the Jemez Pueblo on behalf of the Presbytery of Santa Fe.

The following people joined as members: wife Emily Shields, sons Otho and Harvey Shields, Romaldo, Trinidad and Josefita Montoya by letter of transfer from the Presbyterian Church of Del Norte, CO.

At that organizing meeting, Romaldo Montoya was ordained and installed as a ruling elder. The sermon was preached in Spanish by Jose. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered by the Rev. Sheldon Jackson.

The next record we have says that on Sunday, October 19, 1879, Jose Ynez Perea was installed as a ruling elder in the Jemez Pueblo church. On January 23, 1880, he was listed in the session minutes when Mauricio Archuleta was received into membership by letter of transfer from the church of Cinecero, CO. Jose offered the closing prayer that day.

On March 13, 1880, Perea was present and offered the opening prayer when Juan and Juliana Sandoval and their children Jose and Felicitia, and Alvelina were received as members on their profession of faith and rebaptism as Catholics. The Sandoval's child Moyses was also baptized.

The earliest recorded activity in Jemez Springs was a meeting of the pueblo church leaders on May 8, 1880. Rev. Shields gave the sermon. The following people were received into membership on their profession of faith: Francisco and Viviana Archuleta and their children Calletana and Louis. All were rebaptized except Jose.

Shields wrote: "He did not seem willing to be baptized. All four had been baptized in the Catholic Church. Jose is the head of a large family many of who are Protestants. Mr. and Mrs. Archuleta are old, he being in his 73rd year."

Two months later on July 18, 1880, Rev. Shields baptized Mosheim Joseph, son of Rev. Jose and Susan Perea.

On Sunday, September 5, 1880, the Presbytery of Santa Fe met at the Jemez Pueblo church and Jose Ynez Perea was ordained as an Evangelist in the Presbyterian Church. That same day Perea offered the opening prayer when John Miller, the trader at the pueblo, and Eusabio Culacqui, a Jemez Indian, were received into church membership by profession of faith and baptism.

After ordaining him, the Presbytery of Santa Fe assigned Jose to a mission field that included Sandoval, Bernalillo, Las Placitas, Alameda, Salazar, Cubero and Cebolleta. Eventually he moved to Pajarito, southwest of Albuquerque. He died at home in 1900.

Jose Ynez Perea taught, preached, wrote, edited, translated the good news of Jesus Christ among Hispanics and Puebloans in northern and central New Mexico. He spread the Protestant Christian faith in his words and deeds and was instrumental in the beginnings of Presbyterian churches in this valley. He is one of “great cloud of witnesses” that has gone before us and cheers us on today.

When I came here 19 years ago, we started worshiping in this original sanctuary on our anniversary weekend. I hope you’ll continue the tradition after I retire. It’s important to gather in this historic sacred space and join with that “great cloud of witnesses” like the Pereas, the Archuletas, the Shields, the Fentons, the Caldwelles, the Sandovals and all the others who served Christ over the past 140 years.

It’s important to remember who we are as Presbyterians and whose we are as God’s beloved. It’s important to remember that being the community church is part of our DNA and you will need to discern how to fulfill that role going forward. Connecting to the stories of our ancestors in the faith like Rev. Jose Ynez Perea will hopefully help you plan for and prepare for the future God has in store.

Remember this church existed for 120 years prior to my being called to serve as your pastor. I believe God has someone in mind to serve this church and community when I’m gone. Yes, God is not done with this church. You have a bright, beautiful and adventurous future ahead of you. And your ancestors in Christ, like Don Ynez, will be cheering you on.

July 4, 2021 (140th Anniversary)

David Whiteley, Pastor

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church